

Study findings: International student mobility builds trust and long-term relationships for the UK

A British Council commissioned¹ study investigated the cultural relations dimensions of international student mobility and found that it builds trust and long-term relationships for the participating countries around the world.

The contribution of international HE to the UK economy is well documented, this latest study set out to find and collate evidence of the cultural relations contribution(s) of international student mobility.

Supporting the experience for international students in the UK, and for UK students studying internationally is integral to UK's international reach and influence.

This paper is a summary of the research findings. For further details, references and context please see full report.

The research revisited the British Council's Global Perceptions Survey data² for 2021 with particular focus on analysing how international study experience related to perceptions of trust and influence. This was augmented with a literature review, and in-depth interviews (including with nine British Council sector experts, 23 international student alumni, and 17 international HE-sector stakeholders (from the UK and overseas)).

The research identifies four dimensions of cultural relations³ influenced by international student mobility:

- cross-cultural understanding and competence, which facilitates the development of
- cross-cultural networks
- enhanced global perspectives
- and language proficiency.

¹ Impact Stories UK led this British Council commissioned study

² British Council's Global Perceptions Survey 2021 - The G20 research surveys educated young people (aged 18-34, with at least secondary education). A 1,000 nationally representative (online) sample per country is sourced from public panels across each of the G20 countries. There is a boosted sample for the UK (2,600 in the 2021 wave) to allow for devolved country analysis. The 2021 wave also included respondents from five non-G20 countries; Ukraine, Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya.

https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/global_perceptions_survey_2021.pdf

³ Cultural relations constitute activities whereby individuals and institutions from different countries seek to build credible, long-term relationships in the cultural sphere for mutual benefit. These continuous, long-term engagements increase familiarity and trust in both directions, reducing the need to allocate resources towards managing risks and facilitating greater security, stability, and prosperity for all parties. Cultural relations can be used to generate soft power but, paradoxically, works best when not treated as a tool of influence. Cultural relations can involve governments but more often includes interactions among non-state groups. The people-to-people connections offered through cultural relations can provide a safe or neutral platform for positive bilateral engagement even during periods of political tension [British Council (2021) [Soft Power and cultural relations in a time of crisis](#). British Council. Goethe-Institute (2018) Cultural relations in societies in transition: a literature review]

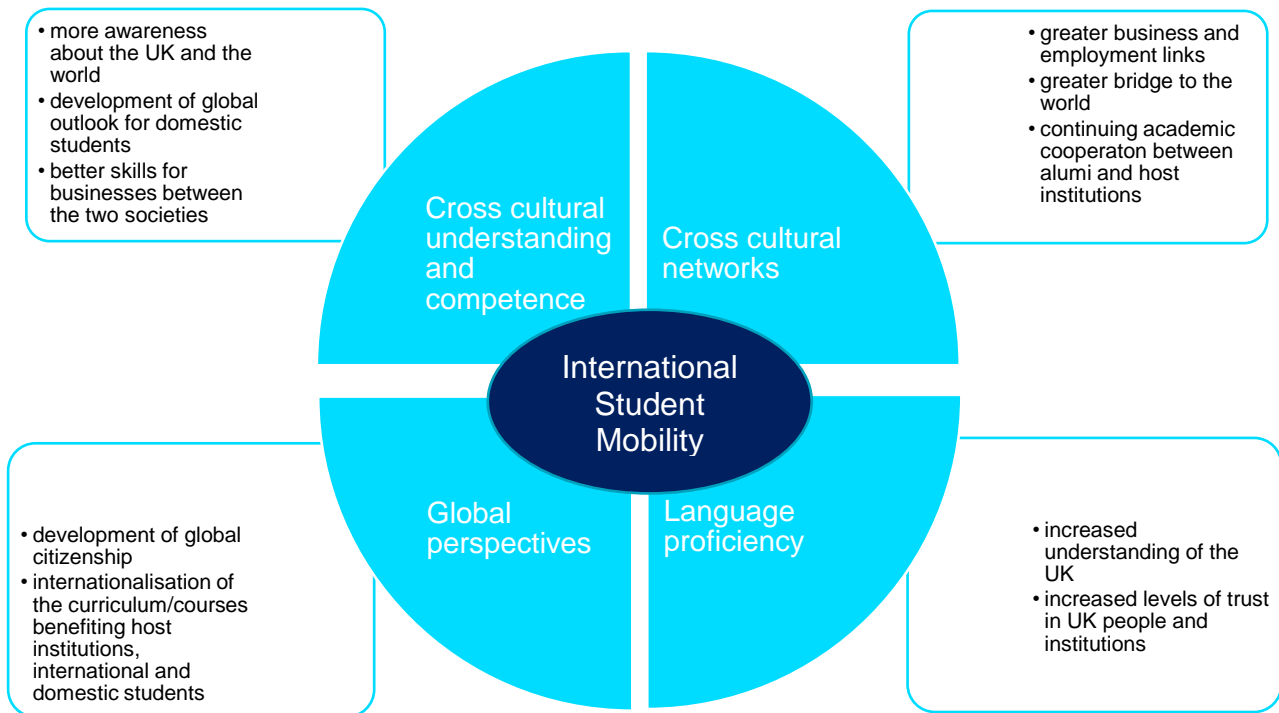
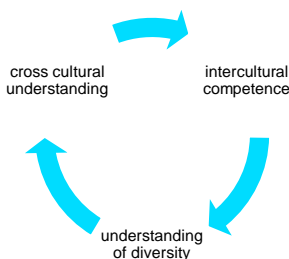


Figure 1. The four dimensions of cultural relations influenced by international student mobility.

Our research shows that international student mobility and cultural relations are intrinsically linked in ways which benefit individuals and nations. The development of language proficiency, intercultural understanding and ties, and global perspectives benefit the individuals participating in international student mobility but also have wider benefits for institutions, domestic students, businesses as well as countries. Nations reap the benefits of increased trust, soft power⁴ and long-term partnerships.

Cross cultural understanding and competence leading to enhanced understanding of diversity



Studying in the UK increases familiarity with the country, and the Global Perceptions Survey in 2021 showed that those who know the UK tend to have greater trust in UK institutions, people and government. Broadly speaking, the same pattern is shown within the data for other combinations of origin country student group and host countries.

⁴ Soft Power is the advantage gained by an international actor through its association with admirable values and culture. It is the state's ability to influence through attraction rather than coercion. Soft power is not a practice itself but rather a country's characteristic ability to influence people through its most attractive assets, including culture, education, language, and values. (Nye, J. (2003) Propaganda isn't the way: soft power)

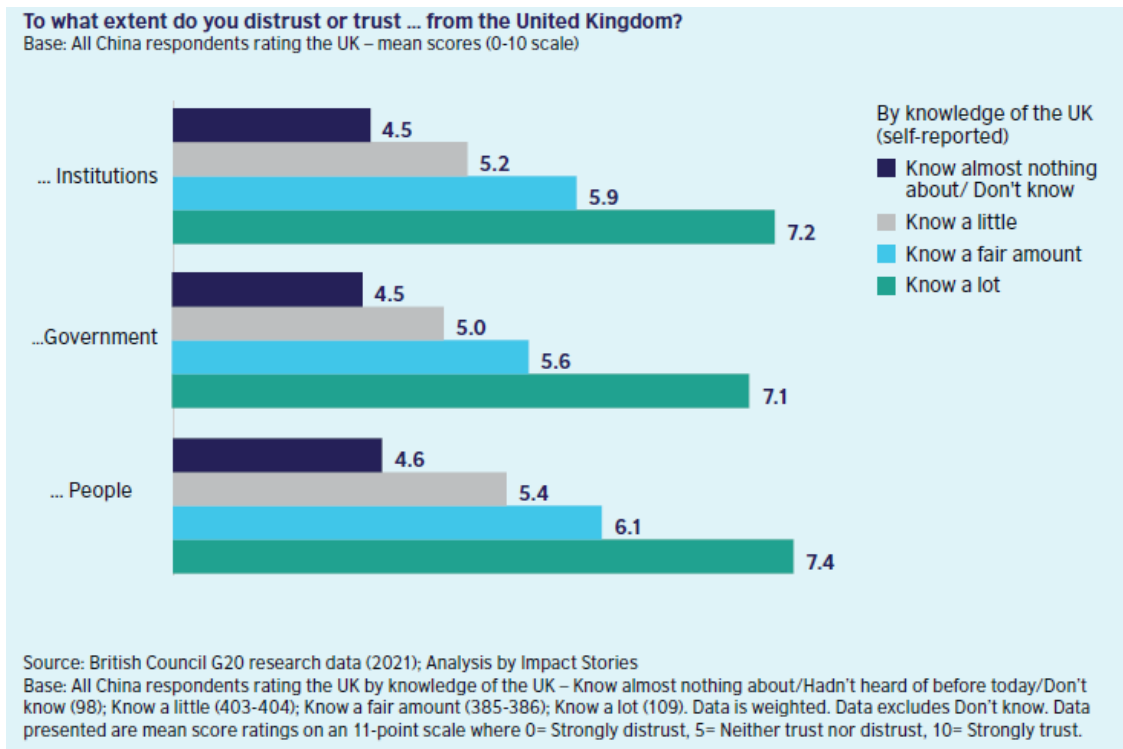


Chart 1: young people who know the UK better tend to trust the UK more⁵

International students bring their own expectations, norms and experiences to the classroom and lecture theatre⁶. While it is important for UK students to experience international study wherever possible, there are also significant benefits for domestic students who learn alongside students from other countries at home as well.

In the same sense that domestic students gain cultural exposure through studying alongside their international peers, international students spend time on campus and within communities in their wider host societies. Through participation in daily life, they experience how their host society functions, and gain a greater understanding of its norms and values that goes beyond the often stereotyped and formulaic representations of that culture which many have previously encountered through literature and film. This daily cultural exposure is then compounded for some by studies which have a historical, political or cultural focus, helping them to develop a deep and nuanced understanding of their host country's culture.

“If I am teaching a class in African politics – or indeed a class in politics generally – and I have students [from Africa] who can talk about their lived experience, it makes such a difference and the other students really value it.” Academic

⁵ This example is analysis of Chinese respondents, but the same findings are relevant to respondents from other respondents to the Global Perceptions Survey 2021.

⁶ Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29, 697–712.

	% who rate themselves as 'strong' in this skill	% whose study experience in the UK has a positive impact on this skill
My ability to self-reflect and recognise how my own values and norms have been shaped by my experience of the world	78%	91%
My ability to work successfully with people from all over the world	77%	91%
My capacity to be open and unprejudiced when encountering people from different cultures	76%	90%
My English language skills	76%	91%
My awareness and understanding of different cultures and perspectives	75%	90%
My capacity to empathise with people who are different to me	75%	89%

I10 How would you rate yourself in the following areas?

IM40 What impact, if any, do you feel your study experience in the UK had on the following? Base: All (1,181)

Source: British Council (2022) Alumni Cultural Report (Internal)

Chart 2: UK alumni view their international experience as having contributed to their development of intercultural skills Source: British Council (2022) Alumni Cultural Report (Internal)

Several academic studies⁷ have also shown that working while studying is often a positive influence on the richness and depth of inter-cultural experience for students because it helps them get involved in the daily life of the host society outside of the campus and facilitates language proficiency by 'forcing' students to use their host country's language more frequently and actively.

"My career increasingly involves working with people from Western cultures to help them make investment decisions in China ... Living and working in the UK has given me a deeper inter-cultural understanding of different nationalities to help me maximise opportunities" UK Alum, China

After graduation, many employers (in origin and host countries) are attracted by bicultural understanding which comes from lived experience, alongside improved language proficiency, because it means that their employees are better equipped to undertake business within and between the two societies.

Within the UK, it is also striking how widely spread around the country are internationally mobile students. There are about 165 public Higher Education Providers (HEPs) in the UK and almost all of them welcome significant numbers of international students.

⁷ Including Kwadzo, M. (2014). International Students' Experience of Studying and Working at a Northeastern Public University in the US. *Journal of International Students*. 4. 279-291

“My parents would come separately at least once a year during my PhD and grew to love Belfast and love people in Northern Ireland. And it changed their understanding of British politics, Irish politics, global politics, and really expanded their empathy. And it's kind of like the ripple effect.....if you live abroad, family always wants to come visit you. So, I've had lots of family come visit me. And it's, it's always an opportunity, I think, to have conversations like this, where you can kind of expand somebody's understanding or their empathy for people that they may be operating on stereotypes or misconceptions or outdated historical awareness.” UK Alum, USA’

As comments from a student from the USA who had studied in Northern Ireland illustrate, this wide geographic dispersion means that the knowledge and understanding of the UK which internationally mobile students develop can be rooted in a local and regional understanding far ahead of that of the vast majority of international tourists or business travellers. The affection and connections which internationally mobile students develop with the UK can be carried forward into academic or business careers which are then focused on the city or

region of the UK in which they studied.

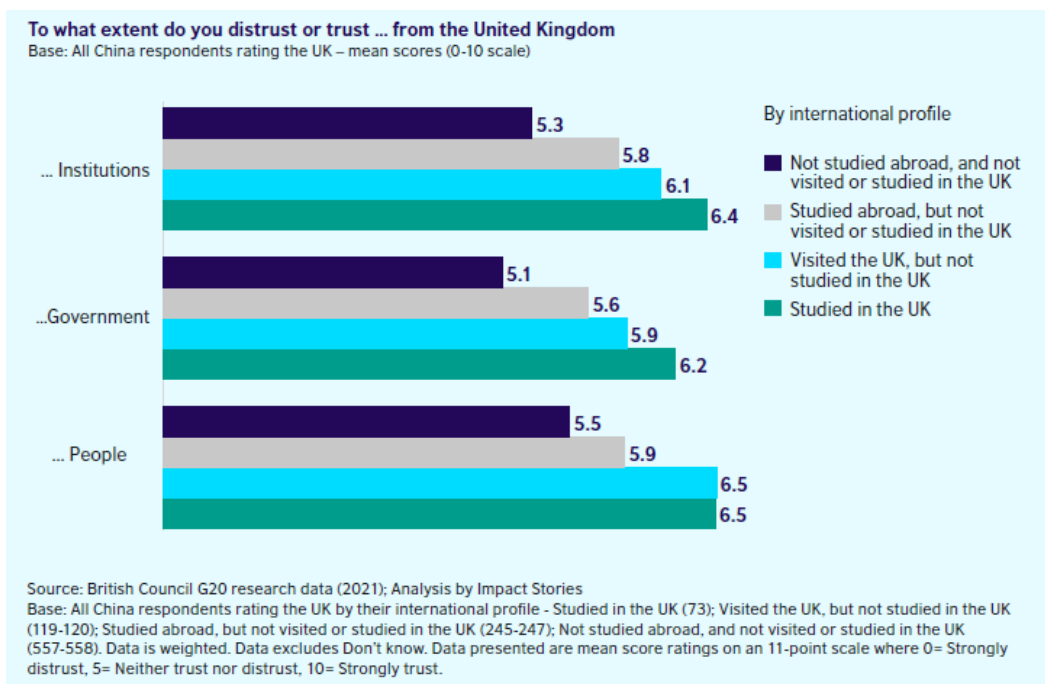


Chart 3: Studying in the UK is associated with a higher average level of trust in the UK

An international student experience at a HEP in a country such as the UK exposes individual students to a breadth and diversity of cultures and perspectives in a relatively compressed timescale in a way which is almost certainly unique in their lifetime.

“Encouraging our domestic students to have the confidence to interact with students from other countries with international perspectives in classes is the first step towards encouraging that interesting engagement with international opportunities more widely.” Internationalisation Manager, UK Higher Education Provider

Employers increasingly recognise that commercial success in a globalised economy will demand employees who can understand the perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours of people from different backgrounds and also work constructively with them. Management Consultants McKinsey have undertaken a series of analyses and now have data from more than 1,000 large companies

in 15 countries. The data show that top-quartile companies for ethnic and cultural diversity outperformed those in the fourth quartile by 36 percent in profitability (McKinsey, 2020)⁸ Research with recent international graduates from UK HEPs shows that the UK appeals as a study destination precisely because of the diversity of backgrounds present on UK campuses (Chart 4).



Chart 4: Exposure to diversity is viewed as an attractive aspect of study in the UK British Council (2022) Alumni Cultural Report (Internal)

Higher Education Providers (HEPs) believe that UK students can benefit from exposure to diversity as much as international students and that the act of global mobility itself can improve skills from which domestic students can learn and benefit.

⁸<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/diversity%20and%20inclusion/diversity%20wins%20how%20inclusion%20matters/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters-vf.pdf>

One of the UK HEPs interviewed for this research also provided direct feedback from local employers on the value they found in employing international students with the necessary intercultural competence and bicultural understanding.

“We worked with Japanese and Indian graduates in the UK HQ for 6-9 months and they were sent back to their home countries to set up the company’s overseas office. With the 6-9 months of working experience in the UK, they developed the mindset, value and drive to carry on working for the company overseas.” Feedback from UK employer to local Higher Education Provider

Development of cross-cultural networks

Academic research highlights the often profound impact of a period of international study on personal development, confidence and resilience^{9,10}). The vast majority of internationally mobile students are young people, typically under 30¹¹. As with many students, several stakeholders and alumni interviewed for this report observed that their period of international study coincided with a crucial period of the individual’s life when they are becoming independent adults, learning how to be responsible for themselves emotionally and practically and forming their own opinions and perspectives on the world.

Development of multi-national friendship networks is a characteristic of international student mobility that has been much commented on in the academic literature (Robinson et al 2020)¹².

Importantly, international student mobility experienced in countries such as the UK, USA, Australia or NZ is now a truly multicultural rather than bicultural experience in which the international student will be among students from all over the world on campus and potentially among citizens from all over the world in their local community.

There are also many examples of academic co-operation continuing between alumni and their host faculty, especially given that the majority of internationally mobile students study at Masters or PhD level and a

“the networks/experiences that I connected to have been useful to bring out PNG experience to the global arena and vice versa. We have our own community well connected to [HEP] and its alumni. Some of my lecturers who have been doing participatory programming have been supporting my work, and they are also learning from us - e.g. indigenous way of learning/evaluation” UK Alum, Papua New Guinea

⁹ DeGraaf, Don, Cynthia Slagter, Kelly Larsen, and Elisa Ditta. (2013) The Long-term Personal and Professional Impacts of Participating in a Study Abroad Program.” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 23: 42–59

¹⁰ Gu, Q, Schweisfurth, M., Day, C. (2010). Learning and growing in a ‘foreign’ context: Intercultural experiences of international students. *Compare*. 40. 7-23.

¹¹ In the UK, data collected by HESA shows that 86% of all international students enrolled in 2021/2022 were under 30.

¹² Robinson, O., Somerville, K. & Walsworth S. (2020) Understanding friendship formation between international and host-national students in a Canadian university, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 13:1, 49-70

significant minority go on to pursue academic careers themselves, often maintaining links to the research they undertook during their international student mobility experience.

Development of global perspectives

Most internationally mobile students also recognise that alongside the formal qualifications, the intercultural competences discussed earlier are equally important in facilitating global citizenship¹³.

Education systems around the world are consciously trying to build international awareness and understanding into their courses in recognition of the global pressures and opportunities likely to impact the future careers of their young people. Most obviously, international perspectives are routinely reflected in courses focused on business and economics because so much business is now global. HEPs and academics often argue that the presence of international students on business courses has both driven a more rapid internationalisation of the curriculum and informed and enriched how it is taught.

Most would go further and argue that few areas of academic enquiry can now sensibly be taught without a global perspective. In areas such as history and politics this is contributing to a reappraisal of traditional perspectives on issues such as colonialism, gender and black history.

Internationally mobile students are themselves contributing to the greater internationalisation of courses and providing global perspectives which also enrich the understanding and widen the horizons of domestic students.

HEPs also see a reinforcing mechanism at play in which academics respond to the presence of international students on their courses by making those courses more internationally relevant.

“The presence of international students in the classroom encourages staff to engender a globalised understanding of teaching and research, which benefits home students.” Internationalisation Manager, UK Higher Education Provider

“It was an eye opener to other opportunities, cultures and knowledge out there in the world” UK Alum, Nigeria (ISI 2022-23)

International students are therefore seen to bring wider experience and perspectives into the campus.

Feedback from alumni suggests that the experience of international study often leads to a profound change in their understanding of their own identity and place in the world. It provides them with opportunities to contextualise their own personal experience in a far wider and more diverse set of experiences which offers a truly global perspective.

Development of language proficiency

International study, irrespective of where it is undertaken, is associated with an increased English language ability, in part because of the spread of English Medium Education but also

¹³ British Council (2022a) Alumni Cultural Relations Report (Internal)

because of the more general trend for English to function as the language of international travel and global engagement.¹⁴

The impact of English in a wider context has been explored in great depth by the British Council through the Global Perceptions Survey 2021. English facilitates access to a wider and more international set of information resources offering a greater range of views on global topics than might be available through purely national and home language sources. It also facilitates access to far wider and more diverse friendship networks, especially in the age of social media. As far back as 2012, the British Council’s report, Trust Pays¹⁵, showed the statistical relationship between ability in English and levels of trust in the UK which flows from these types of mediating impacts. The data from the Global Perceptions Survey 2021 reinforces this finding (Chart 5).

English Medium Education (EME) is becoming more and more common around the world. Countries with a native language which is not widely spoken increasingly teach courses in English and/or accept English speaking students as a way of attracting both international students and international academics. The pathway to international study is a major driver of demand for both English language courses and for English competency exams such as IELTS.

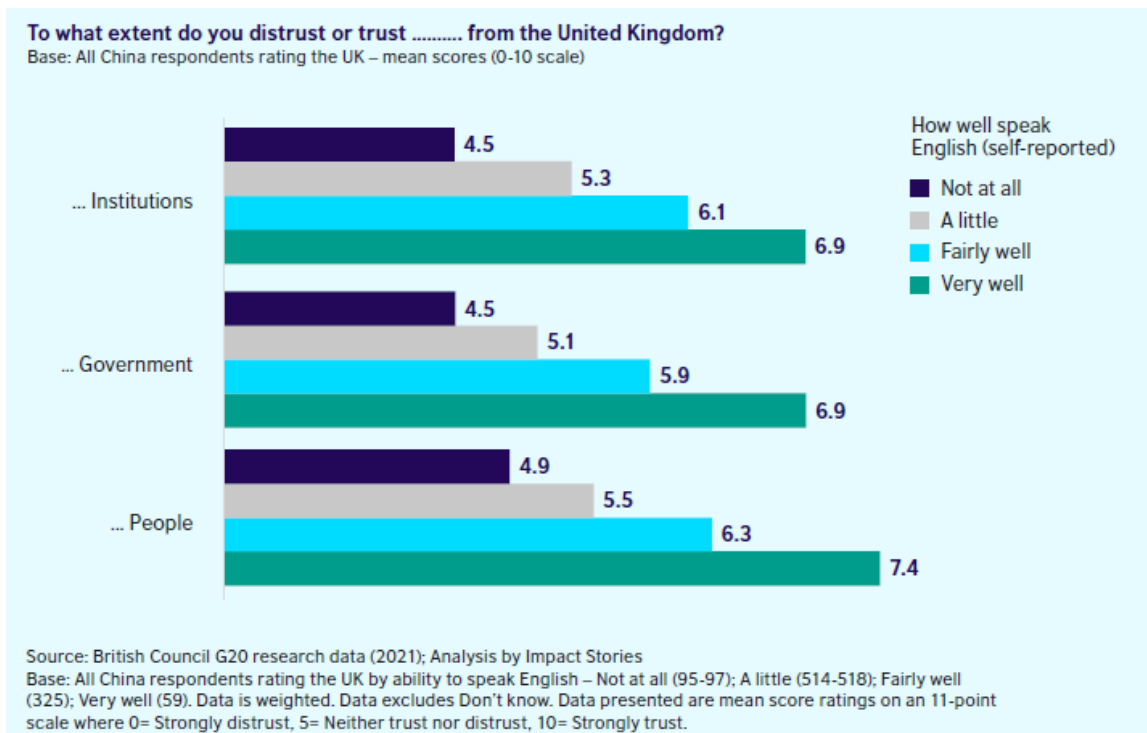


Chart 5: proficiency in English is associated with higher levels of trust in the UK¹⁶

¹⁴ British Council Global Perceptions Survey 2021

https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/global_perceptions_survey_2021.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/trust-pays-report-v2.pdf>

¹⁶ This shows analysis of Chinese respondents to the British Council’s Global Perceptions Survey 2021. Broadly speaking, the picture is similar for respondents from all countries – there is a clear statistical relationship between ability in English & trust in UK Institutions, UK Government and UK People. The effect is especially noticeable at higher levels of self-reported ability in English.

The national benefits of Cultural Relations impact through international student mobility

“Our ability to engage successfully with other countries, organisations and people will depend to a large extent on whether we possess the necessary intercultural and foreign language skills to make fruitful connections, whether in trade and investment, charity/NGO programmes or as government and international organisations. This is fundamentally changing the way in which employers value and seek to develop intercultural skills in the workplace.” (British Council, Culture at Work, 2013)¹⁷

Increased trust and long-term relationships

The discussion above highlights that through international student mobility, many students develop a better understanding of the language of their host country, more extensive personal and professional friendship networks involving that country and a deeper understanding of that culture’s norms, practices and values, set against a deeper understanding of their own culture’s norms, practices and values.

British Council’s Global Perceptions Survey 2021 showed that increased understanding of a country’s language and increased understanding of the country itself are strongly associated with increased levels of trust in that country. Taking young Chinese students as an example, the data show there is a clear statistical relationship between self-reported ability in English and self-reported levels of trust in UK Institutions, UK Government and UK People. It shows that on average, young people who have studied in the UK are more likely than their peers to trust the UK’s people, institutions and government.

In line with Contact Theory¹⁸, people who have friends from a particular culture and country background are also likely to feel more positively about that culture and country.

And this finding of increased trust echoes the finding of the BIS research¹⁹ undertaken in 2013:

“Alumni’s perceptions of the UK, as a nation and society...seem to underpin a general impression that the UK and its people can generally be trusted, as well as having an international outlook and being potentially ‘open for business.’ It would be hard to generate a more positive set of qualities (brand values) for a nation seeking to do business on the world stage.” BIS, 2013

The sense of trust and connectedness which internationally mobile students develop with their host country is often reflected in their ongoing interest in elements of popular culture such as sport.

¹⁷ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/culture-at-work-report-v2.pdf>

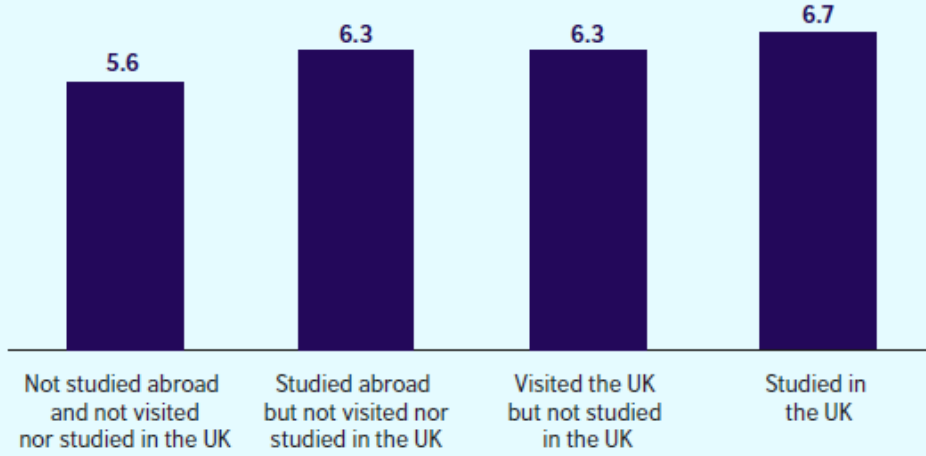
¹⁸ Pettigrew, T. F., Tropp, L. R., Wagner, U., & Christ, O. (2011). Recent advances in intergroup contact theory. *International journal of intercultural relations*, 35(3), 271-280

¹⁹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/240407/bis-13-1172-the-wider-benefits-of-international-higher-education-in-the-uk.pdf

Taking everything into account, how would you rate the United Kingdom on its overall influence in the world?

Base: All China respondents rating the UK – mean scores (0-10 scale)

By international profile



Source: British Council G20 research data (2021); Analysis by Impact Stories

Base: All China respondents rating the UK by their international profile - Studied in the UK (73); Visited the UK but not studied in the UK (120); Studied abroad but not visited nor studied in the UK (246); Not studied abroad and not visited nor studied in the UK (545). Data is weighted. Data excludes Don't know. Data presented are mean score ratings on an 11-point scale where 0= A very negative influence in the world, 5= Neither negative nor positive, 10= A very positive influence in the world.

Chart 6: Studying in the UK is associated with higher average perceptions that the UK is a positive influence in the world²⁰

²⁰ This example is analysis of Chinese respondents, but the same findings are relevant to respondents from other respondents to the G20 perceptions survey 2021.

Soft power

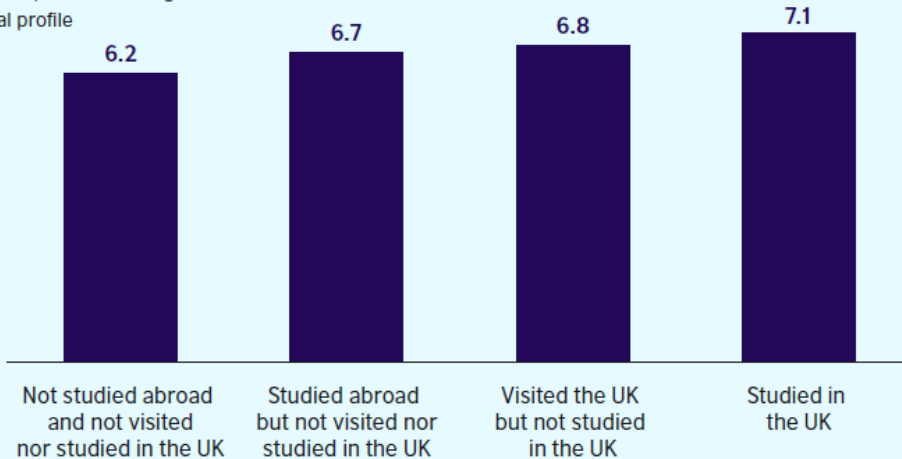
The attractiveness of the UK’s system has long been identified as one of its key soft power strengths.

Data from the British Council’s Global Perceptions Survey 2021 reinforces the conclusion that on average, young people who have studied in the UK find the UK more attractive than their country peers.

And taking everything into consideration, how attractive overall do you find the UK?

Base: All China respondents rating the UK – mean scores (0-10 scale)

By international profile



Source: British Council G20 research data (2021); Analysis by Impact Stories

Base: All China respondents rating the UK - Studied in the UK (73); Visited the UK, but not studied in the UK (120); Studied abroad, but not visited or studied in the UK (247); Not studied abroad, and not visited or studied in the UK (559). Data is weighted. Data excludes Don't know. Data presented are mean score ratings on an 11-point scale where 0= Very unattractive, 5= Neither attractive nor unattractive, 10= Very attractive.

Chart 7: Studying in the UK is associated with a higher likelihood of finding the UK attractive²¹

The experience of study abroad exposes internationally mobile students to approaches, perspectives and values which are often very different to their own. For many, the experience allows them to consider and explore for the first-time different models for how societies can operate.

“The essence of democracy and participatory culture is now super important to me. Study opened up a new way of thinking for me. As a result, I started working for the civil society and actively contributed to bring young people together for political debates/discussions”. UK Alum, Papua New Guinea

Many gain a greater critical distance enabling them to question their own and other’s assumptions and values in a positive way. An international study experience can provide a student with an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of different contexts, expand their horizons and view issues from different perspectives.

²¹ This example is analysis of Chinese respondents, but the same findings are relevant to respondents from other respondents to the G20 perceptions survey 2021.

This openness to debate and discussion encountered by internationally mobile students in the UK may be one reason why they are more likely than their peers to view the UK as a positive influence in the world.

A further channel for soft power influence through international student mobility is from the creation of global ambassadors. This is certainly a specific goal of many scholarship programmes such as Chevening, but HEPs increasingly try to engage all international alumni as institutional ambassadors, for example by inviting them to give outreach talks to new generations of students. Some HEPs also use their alumni to support wider programmes and initiatives around career development and mentoring.

“We've [the UK] educated quite a lot of world leaders and politicians, but we've educated many more activists, social entrepreneurs, librarians, charity leaders.... climate scientists, cancer scientists, and, you know, all of these people that don't get the kudos or the profile” Academic

*“We see it as important to support and look after them and to see it as contributing to their longer-term positive experience. We hope to create ambassadors for the future, whether for the region, the town, the city, the UK in general. The students will go back and take the UK with them. It is hugely powerful and also personal.”
Internationalisation Manager, UK
Higher Education Provider*

Many advocates of the role of education as a soft power asset for the UK point to the value of the 55 current world leaders educated in the country (HEPI, 2022²²). But as one interviewee for this research pointed out, the far greater ambassadorial value for the country comes through the enormous number of professionals and members of civil society who have

been educated in the UK who now have roles of responsibility and influence within their societies and economies.

Conclusion

The research for this report highlights that international student mobility is a significant cultural relations exercise for the UK, involving in excess of 680K young people from more than 200 different countries and states. An exercise which has deep and long lasting impact.

A positive experience for international students is therefore crucial for sustaining the cultural relations benefits for the UK.

There is an opportunity for the sector to build on this research to change the narrative around international student mobility from one focused solely on financial impact to one which takes a more rounded and multi-dimensional view of its impact and benefits.

The research highlights a wider national level opportunity through the development of a large-scale database of UK alumni. This database has the potential to become a major soft power, cultural relations and strategic resource for the UK.

²² HEPI (2022) <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/>

'The UK government is considering how best to foster life-long engagement of alumni with the UK, with all the benefits that can bring to national prosperity'

UK's International Education Strategy

British Council has already taken steps that support the UK's International Education Strategy in this area.

Alumni UK is our new global network for people from around the world who have studied in the UK as an overseas student or on a UK transnational education programme overseas. The programme extends international students' connection with the UK and each other once they have finished their studies, giving them the opportunity to join a global community and to develop their skills to further their careers and to contribute to wider society. In addition to providing alumni with an online networking and careers and employability offer, the British Council engages with alumni through activities in-country and by supporting alumni associations.

We are also designing another new initiative with UK alumni which will be announced in late 2023. Watch this space!